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AUTHOR Wynn, Ruth L.
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ABSTRACT

Investigated as a function of adults' birth cohort--a group of adults born during a specific time period--were beliefs influencing current attitudes toward parenting that prevail in England and the United States. Particular attention was given to the value attached to parental role in relation to the specific roles of spouse and worker. The total sample consisted of 155 volunteers, male and female, ranging in age from 18 to 76 years, diverse in occupational, marital and parental status, and religious and political affiliation. National subsamples differed only in religious affiliation. Parents comprised 56 percent of the sample. The youngest cohort, consisting of participants ranging in age from 18 to 27 years, was for the most part single and childless. Findings revealed only two significant differences for gender, occupational status, and attitudes about providing for the divorced family, both of which appeared to be related to economic issues in the workplace. National differences were slight, suggesting that the processes changing parental attitudes are not geographically restricted. Differences associated with cohorts were more numerous. Of those born before 1930, a higher percentage than in other groups rejected the idea of divorce and believed that it is detrimental to parents and children. Concluding remarks assert that the traditional model of the family which has dominated academic research seems to restrict thinking about parenting. (RH)

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A DEVELOPMENTAL STUDY OF PARENTING ATTITUDES IN ENGLAND AND THE USA: A CROSS NATIONAL STUDY

Ruth L. Wynn, Ph.D.
Syracuse University
Syracuse, N. Y.

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The theoretical orientation adopted by child development research has tended to focus attention on parent-child interactions, rather than on the ideologies that influence parental behavior. In advocating for ecological validity, Bronfenbrenner, in 1974, proposed that the systems supporting and surrounding parent-child interaction should be considered. A decade later, Belsky (1984) in presenting a process model included three contextual factors, the marital relationship, work experiences and social networks, to explicate the multideterminant nature of parenting. While the belief system that supports a society's childrearing practices defines the ecological context for parental behavior, little attention has been paid to the attitudinal climate. The present study was undertaken to examine the beliefs that influence current attitudes toward parenting that prevail in England and the United States as a function of birth cohort of the adult population.

In recent years, parental behavior has undergone some changes in response to the rising divorce rate and as an

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increasing number of mothers of young children enter the work force. While some have viewed the alterations in family lifestyle with alarm, they have had little effect in halting the changes. Now that the statistical trend has reached what Jesse Bernard (1975) has called the "tipping point," it may signal the practical acceptance of these changes on normative grounds. It seemed reasonable to expect that these practical changes would be reflected in attitudes toward parenting as society adapts to the continuous appearance of new issues associated with a changing world.

The research which I will report on today is a public opinion survey designed to examine to what extent the social norms and psychological theory of parenting that developed out of one set of social conditions are still being applied to the new social order. Some of these archaic attitudes are:

1. Good parenting can only be done by a mother and father who are married.
2. Daily parental care is the exclusive responsibility of the mother.
3. It is the exclusive responsibility of the father to provide for his wife and children.
4. Good parenting is highly valued; thus in meeting social expectations self-esteem is enhanced.

Psychological theory has reinforced these norms in stating that the family social environment is an important determinant of child development. Good parenting should provide the young with

a warm, loving and consistently dependable relationship and separations from the mother may lead to emotional instability. Furthermore, a stable bond will act as a secure base from which the child can venture forth into the wider social world (e.g. Ainsworth, 1973; Bowlby, 1969; Erikson, 1963). In addition, close, loving spousal relationships present children with a model for their future close relationships. It is further believed that the presence of a male model in the home, namely the father/husband, is beneficial for the development of both boys and girls (e.g. Hetherington, 1977).

The attitudes associated with the family thus constituted are deeply ingrained in our conceptualization of childrearing. These attitudes represent negative sanctions for those who deviate from the conventional parenting model either by divorce or maternal employment. The lack of congruence of attitudes between an individual and the social group, however, may lead to isolation, and social isolation has been identified as a risk condition for good parenting. Congruence of attitudes, on the other hand, can be perceived as a form of social support which is associated with competence in the parenting role. Although much has been written about recognizing the diversity of childrearing environments and social policies have been implemented to support childrearing in a variety of situations, it seemed instructive to learn more about the normative climate.

The total sample consisted of 155 volunteers, male and female, ranging in age from 18 to 76 years, diverse in

occupational, marital and parental status and religious and political affiliation. Forty-nine percent of the sample interviewed were residents of England, the remaining fifty-one percent were residents of the state of New York. The two national sub-samples differed only according to religious affiliation due to the over representation of membership in the Church of England in the English group, which is to say that the composition of the two national groups did not differ in their distributions according to gender, age, occupational, marital, parental status or according to political views. About half of the sample were Protestants (49%), twenty percent were Catholic, nine percent were Jewish and the remainder were either members of other religious groups or had no religious affiliation. Politically their views were about equally divided to the right and left of the center as represented by their identification with the major political parties in each nation. Social class was determined by occupational status. The respondents were primarily middle class with one-third in non-manual, white collar occupations and one-third either in managerial positions or the professions. There was a significant difference for gender with men occupying more managerial and professional positions than women. Of the women, approximately one-fourth reported themselves as housewives in both national subsamples.

It should also be noted that only 56% of the sample were parents. The large proportion of respondents who were not parents can be accounted for, in part, by the youngest cohort.

This cohort was slightly larger than other cohorts in the sample as the sizes for the different cohorts were selected to reflect approximately the uneven age distribution in the two populations. This youngest cohort, those between the ages of 18 and 27 years, was for the most single and childless. While some may question the wisdom of including non-parents in a survey of attitudes toward parenting, it seemed relevant in as much as they represent a segment of the population who have yet to make decisions about whether or not to become parents and whose views about what is acceptable child rearing behavior may influence the prevailing climate. Of course, if and when they become parents, their views may change.

With only minor differences in wording, e.g., Church of England vs. Episcopal Church, both national groups were interviewed in urban areas and presented with the same closed choice questions. While there is undoubtedly distortion in the use of closed choice questions due to the constraint imposed by listing alternatives, such questions are useful for describing variations across social groups (Schuman and Scott, 1987). Because of the nominal nature of the data, the Chi-Square statistic was used to determine significant differences in characteristics and attitudes among the groups. It was possible to determine whether specific attitudes were associated with a country, cohort or gender.

A primary objective of this study was to assess the value attached to the parental role relative to the other expected

social roles of adulthood, that of spouse and worker. Because self-esteem derives in good measure from the attitudes and respect that others have for a role which in the aggregate represent the institutional response of a particular society, the relevant items were phrased in terms of reputation, i.e., what they would prefer to hear others say of them. Respondents were presented with three forced-choice comparisons to assess their preferences of being considered a good mother/father, a good husband/wife, or a good worker. The role of spouse was the most highly valued with 45% of the total sample ranking it first, the parental role was ranked second by 50%, and worker third by 66%. Significant differences were found in the relative importance given to the role of spouse and parent according to country. This attitudinal difference resulted in a χ^2 of 6.796 which is significant at the .033 level. The English attached greater value to the role of spouse and the Americans a greater value to the parental role. Given the traditional attitudes that place the major responsibility for childrearing upon women, it was somewhat surprising to find no significant differences for either gender or cohort.

Some consideration was given to the possibility that this difference in national attitudes might be related to the divorce rate which is slightly higher in the U.S. than in England and was reflected in the sample; 9% percent of American sample were divorced compared to 6% of the English group. The divorced and separated may through bitterness no longer place a high value on

the spousal role and may instead seek affirmation as parents. No significant difference was found, however, for marital status.

Somewhat related to the national differences in attitudes about parenting is the finding that significantly more American respondents believed that fathers can bring up children as capably as mothers. This difference was significant at the .041 level. While the majority of the total sample (76%) held a similar view, respondents who were married were more likely to reject this notion as did members of the oldest cohort. Older cohorts believed that there is no substitute for a mother's care. Once again there was no difference for gender, although there was for both country and cohort.

In examining attitudes towards mothers' work outside of the home, respondents were asked to select the statement that best reflected their attitudes. The alternatives were ranked by the total sample in the following descending order; a mother may work in all family situations if she wants to even if her husband does not want her to (34%), only if the children are over six years of age (24%), only if it is necessary for financial need (21%), in all family situations if a mother wants to and her husband agrees (18%) and never (3%). While there were no significant differences for country or gender, analysis by cohort and marital status both reached significance. It was impossible to evaluate the interaction of these variables due to the small number of married young and single older persons. The two oldest cohorts, mainly those over fifty, believed that financial need is the only

acceptable reason for a mother to enter the labor force. In contrast, those in the youngest cohort were more likely to endorse the statement that in all family situations it is all right for a mother to work, even against her husband's wishes. Interestingly, 70% of those subscribing to the position that a husband's permission is necessary were married.

Both national groups held many similar attitudes about divorce with almost unanimous agreement of the total sample (97%) in preserving the child's right of access to both parents. The English and Americans did not differ significantly in their selection of the best course of action when a marriage relationship has failed or is failing. Over half of both groups believed in accepting divorce as a remedy rather than remaining together only if there are children for the sake of the children. There was a significant difference for cohorts with older cohorts rejecting the idea of divorce in contrast to later borns who for the most accepted divorce as a remedy for a marriage that had failed.

In line with their attitudes about mothers working, the older cohorts believed that, in the case of divorce, it is the husband's responsibility to provide for his wife and children. There was a significant difference for cohorts. Also, men and women differed significantly in their views concerning child support and maintenance. This difference was significant at the .016 level. Women were about equally divided between believing that it was the father's responsibility to provide for his wife

and children and that the father should provide support only until the mother is self-sufficient, 48% and 46% respectively. Only 6% of the women selected a clean break with division of property and no support. In contrast, 46% of the men opted for a clean break with division of property and no support.

The English appear to be more content with divorce laws than their American counterparts. Over half of the English sample believed that current laws are just right while only 30% of the American sample felt this way. These attitudinal differences resulted in a χ^2 of 12.817 which is significant at the .005 level. When questioned directly about whether the no-fault provision is supportive of parents and children, 66% of the English thought it was compared to only 45% of the Americans. This difference was significant at the .013 level.

In order to examine what revisions have been made within the family to conform to the new circumstances, an item was included about family mealtime, the customary time for parents and children to come together. A majority of the total sample (54%) felt that taking the main meal together was more important than taking part in recreational activities together (28%) or for each family member to follow their own recreational interests (18%). This suggests that neither marital dissolution nor maternal employment have affected attitudes toward this traditional family ritual.

In summation, only two significant differences were found for gender, occupational status and attitudes about providing

for the divorced family. Both appear to be related to economic issues in the work place where there is still much dissatisfaction being expressed by women in regard to the lack of equal pay for equal work and equality of opportunity. On other issues, men and women in both countries have similar attitudes.

National differences were slight, suggesting that the processes that have brought about the changes in parental attitudes are not confined to a single locale. One might assume that the greater emphasis on parenting coupled with less sex-role stereotyping attached to parenting, evident in the American responses, would be associated with greater acceptance of dissolving unhappy marriages easily, especially as the detrimental effects of family conflict and divorce related conflict on children have received so much attention. But it was not so. It may rather be that the higher value given to the role of spouse by the English leads them to accept more readily the freedom to divorce perhaps to seek the valued role in a new marriage. This conclusion, however, is all speculative.

The differences associated with cohorts were more numerous. More of those persons born before 1930 rejected the idea of divorce and believed that it is detrimental for parents and children. They were less willing to endorse not only the new divorce laws, but also the other contemporary ideas of maternal employment and paternal child care. In retaining the social attitudes of their own youth, the older respondents may have been seeking justification for their style of parenting. Given that

the sample interviewed was small and that the responses to closed choice questions were not representative of all attitudes, any generalizations drawn from the findings must remain tentative. As an exploratory study, however, the findings are provocative suggesting that the traditional model of the family which has dominated academic research seems to narrow and restrict thinking about parenting.

In all likelihood, during the next few years, the traditional attitudes will disappear with the older generation. Existing attitudes will yield to the appearance of new beliefs about parenting and the disappearance of the old ones. That this is occurring was revealed by comparing the item on family mealtime in this study with a similar item in a more recent survey of married and divorced or separated mothers of preschool children in New York (Wynn & Bowering, 1987). For both groups reading to the child and playing together were more important than eating together. Unfortunately, I do not have comparable data from England. Psychologists have taken only a fleeting interest in investigating mealtime or the normal eating behavior of children beyond infancy. They have been far more concerned with cognitive stimulation, or food for thought, if you will. This latest study furnishes some evidence that mothers attend to new information when it is available, especially when it is supportive of their functioning and evaluation of themselves under a new set of circumstances. The challenge for future research appears to be the identification of those factors that both enhance children's development and are realizable for the new style of parenting.